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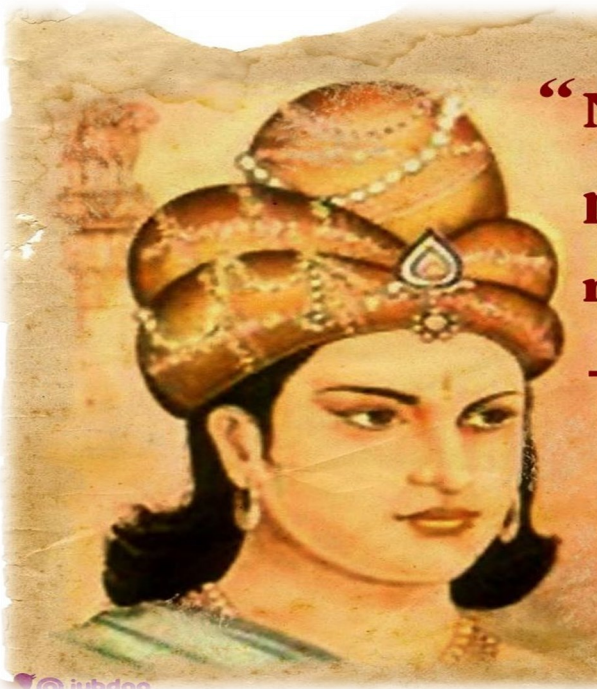
# Greatest Of All Times

*globally selected  
PERSONALITIES*

ISBN:978-81-984229-8-9

Compiled by:  
Prof Dr S Ramalingam

c. 304 BC <::><::><::> c.232 BC



“No society can  
prosper if it aims at  
making things easier  
– instead, it should  
aim at making  
people stronger”

– Emperor Ashoka



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c. 304 BC



232 BC

# Ashoka the Great

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashoka>

&

<https://unacademy.com/content/nda/study-material/indian-history/ashoka-the-great/>

**Ashoka**

[Chakravartin](#)  
[Devanampriya](#)  
[Priyadarsin](#)  
[Magadharaja](#)



A c. 1st century BCE / CE relief from [Sanchi](#), showing Ashoka on his chariot, visiting the [Ramagrama](#).

<u>Emperor of the Maurya Empire</u>	
<b>Reign</b>	c. 268 – 232 BCE
<b><u>Coronation</u></b>	c. 269 BCE
<b>Predecessor</b>	<a href="#">Bindusara</a>
<b>Successor</b>	<a href="#">Dasharatha</a>
<u>Crown Prince of Magadha</u>	
<b>Predecessor</b>	<a href="#">Susima</a>
<b>Successor</b>	<a href="#">Kunala</a>
<u>Viceroy of Avantirastra</u>	
<b>Born</b>	c. 304 BCE
<b>Died</b>	232 BCE
<b>Spouses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Devi</a> (Sri Lankan tradition)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Karuvaki</a> (own inscriptions)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Padmavati</a> (North Indian tradition)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Asandhimitra</a> (Sri Lankan tradition)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Tishyaraksha</a> (Sri Lankan and North Indian tradition)</li> </ul>
<b><u>Issue</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Mahendra</a> (Sri Lankan tradition)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Sanghamitta</a> (Sri Lankan tradition)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Tivala</a> (own inscriptions)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Kunala</a> (North Indian tradition)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Jalauka</a> (Kalhana's Rajatarangini)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Charumati</a></li> </ul>
<b><u>Dynasty</u></b>	<a href="#">Maurya</a>
<b>Father</b>	<a href="#">Bindusara</a>
<b>Mother</b>	<a href="#">Subhadra</a> or <a href="#">Dharma</a>
<b>Religion</b>	Supported <a href="#">Buddhism</a> but also other religions, propagated <a href="#">dharma</a> ("righteousness")

## Ashoka The Great

This article is about Ashoka the Great's conquests, beliefs, the policy of the administration, Dhamma, interest in art and architecture like his well-known - Ashok Chakra.

Many rulers and kingdoms thrived on the land of India, from the Cholas and Pandavas in the ancient period to the Britishers in the modern era. Yet, no one is as great as Ashoka. He belonged to the Mauryan dynasty and ruled from 268 BCE-233 BCE. Under

his reign, the empire reached its zenith with excellence in numerous areas. The empire ranged from modern-day India to Afghanistan and Bangladesh, with a total land boundary of five million square kilometres. He was a preacher of Buddhism, and his works earned him the title of Ashoka the Great or The Great Ashoka.

### Early Life of Ashoka the Great:

The Great Ashoka was the grandson of the founder of the Mauryan Empire, Chandragupta Maurya and the son of Bindusara.

He was born in Pataliputra, the capital city of the Mauryan Empire but spent his childhood in the provincial capitals, Ujjain and Taxila.

According to multiple theories of historians, Ashoka killed his 99 brothers for the throne of the Mauryan Empire.

Some sources say that he was disliked by his father, Bindusara, due to his appearance, but he was also impressed by his skills in warfare and administration.

Even at a young age, he was given the responsibility to suppress a revolt in Taxila and then for the governance of Ujjain, which is proved by an inscription found in the city.

### Administration of Ashoka's Empire:

Ashoka was a great administrator as his methods are used in present times and helped maintain order throughout his vast empire.

The administration was highly centred, and every sector had officials governing them.

Power was also decentralised among the district and village levels.

### Conquests of Ashoka:

His efforts in suppressing revolts in the Avanti province of the Mauryan Empire made him the province's ruler at the age of 18.

During his rule of the first eight years, Ashoka was successful in his expansion policies. By 261 BCE, the Mauryan Empire was spread from Afghanistan in the West to Assam in the East, covering the whole Indian Gangetic plains and the north. In South India, he defeated many ancient Tamil Kingdoms and annexed the part of Modern-day Karnataka in the Indian Peninsula.

The conquest of Kalinga is the most significant part of Ashoka The Great's history. The region was politically and economically prosperous and held a strong navy, making it important for the Mauryans to conquer it. Earlier, Chandragupta attempted, but he was pushed back. These features made Ashoka resilient to capture it. However, the



war ended in killing around one lakh soldiers and 1.5 million civilians, including men, women, and children. This event emerged as a turning point in the history of Ashoka, and he decided to quit violence and adopt Buddhism.

### **Buddhism under Ashoka's Empire:**

After the Kalinga war, Ashoka went on adopting Buddhism to spread peace and non-violence in his kingdom.

His emphasis was on spreading ideas of Buddhism throughout his empire. He formulated his beliefs and moral code of conduct called "Dhamma", representing righteousness in life.

He erected many pillars, stupas, chakras, and monuments like the Ashok Chakra and Ashok Pillar. He spread the ideas inscribed in his sayings and deeds on these pillars and rock edicts that work as important archaeological sources in today's times.

Under his rule, Buddhism spread outside and began to be followed worldwide. It is alleged that he sent his son and daughter to Sri Lanka.

### **Ashok Chakra:**

Ashok Chakra, a major architectural work in the reign of Ashoka, is religiously significant. It consists of 24 chakras, where 12 spokes are the denomination of Dependent Origination and the 12 spokes of Dependent Termination.

Ashok chakra can be found on many relics and pillars constructed during this time, like the Lion Capital of Sarnath and the Ashok Pillar.

They portray the Dharmachakra, i.e., the wheel of law and the wheel of time. They are a representation of Gautum Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath.

Ashok Chakra is now a part of the Indian flag centred in the middle in navy blue colour.

### **Ashok Pillars:**

Ashok Pillars are one of the major architectural works of Ashoka The Great. He built these pillars throughout the Mauryan empire, symbols of pride, confidence and power. The figure of Asiatic lions at the top is now the National Emblem of India.

The height of the pillars ranged from 12-15 metres and weighed 50 tonnes. Only a few pillars are left due to relocation done by new emperors and empires.

The major attributes of these pillars were the inverted lotus and a lion sitting at the top. The pillar also comprised the Ashok Chakra.

The lion was because Buddha belonged to the Shakya clan, meaning the Lion clan. It symbolises Buddhism.

Ashok pillars had edicts proclamations of Buddhist sayings written in Brahmi script. They describe the life of Ashoka, including his change of heart after the Kalinga war.

### Conclusion:

Ashoka is one of the best rulers that ever ruled over Indian territory as he made the Mauryan empire reach its zenith. His efficient military, political and administrative skills expanded the Mauryan empire to a commendable extent. He was not only a conqueror but also a signifier of peace and order and spent half of his life preaching and spreading Buddhism. His efforts led to a worldwide recognition of the Buddhist religion and inspired many people.

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### Lion Capital of Ashoka

A replica of the Lion Capital of Ashoka, which topped an ancient memorial pillar in Sarnath. The original capital, which is in a museum at Sarnath, is the basis for India's state emblem.

# The Edicts of Ashoka

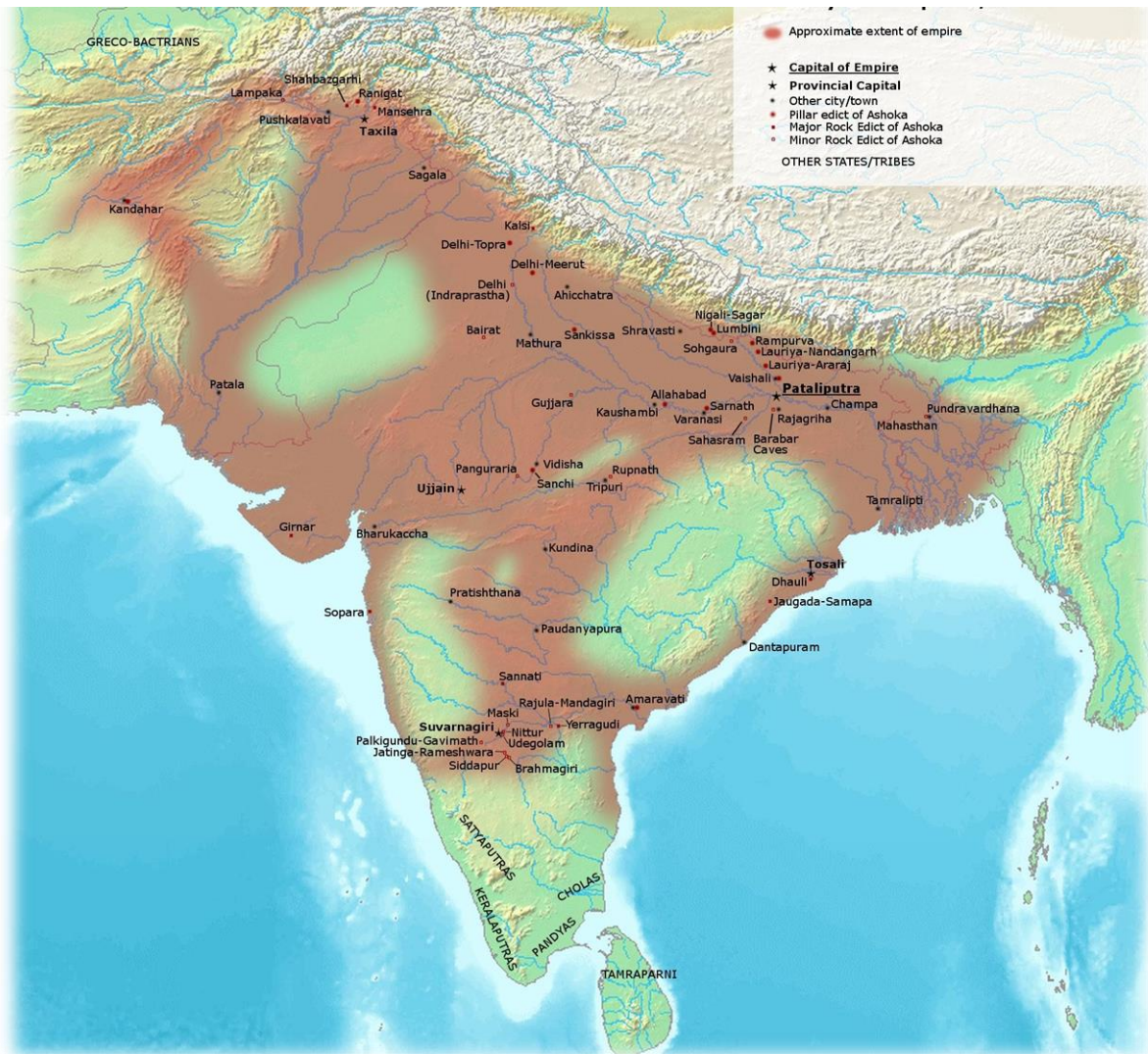
<https://visitworldheritage.com/en/buddha/the-edicts-of-ashoka/92cfe762-7af6-4a65-b982-9e941e3dae1d>



The Edicts of Ashoka are a collection of more than thirty inscriptions on pillars, boulders, and cave walls, made by Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire during his reign, from 268 BCE to 232 BCE. Ashoka's "Inscriptions of the Dharma" were dispersed throughout the areas of modern-day India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan and Pakistan. They provided the first tangible evidence of Buddhism, along with the locations of important early buddhist archaeological sites. The edicts describe Ashoka's views about dhamma, an earnest attempt to solve some of the problems faced by a complex society.

The inscriptions proclaim Ashoka's adherence to Buddhist philosophy which, as in Hinduism, is called dharma, "Law". They describe his efforts to develop the Buddhist dharma throughout his kingdom, which spanned most of present-day India and parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. Although Buddhism and Gautama Buddha are mentioned, the edicts focus on social and moral rules rather than specific religious practices or the philosophical dimension of Buddhism.





This Map of the Mauryan Empire is based on the map provided on p. 69 of Kulke, H.; Rothermund, D. (2004), A History of India, 4th, Routledge. According to the authors, the empty areas within the boundaries of the empire were the "autonomous and free tribes."



## Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi

Madhya Pradesh, India

<https://visitworldheritage.com/en/buddha/buddhist-monuments-at-sanchi/a6e7eec5-fcc4-4a7a-823a-28c89416008f>

It was the Indian emperor Ashoka's embrace of Buddhism in the 3rd century BC that turned it into one of the world's major religions. Here



at Sanchi, you can see the greatest tribute he built to his new faith - an enormous stupa containing relics of Buddha himself. The intricate carved stone artworks telling historical stories help make the Great Stupa of Sanchi one of the marvels of the ancient world.



Stupa number 3 on the main terrace at Sanchi, as seen through the carved northern gateway of the Great Stupa.





Without Emperor Ashoka, Buddhism would possibly never have had such a dramatic impact around the world. In the 3rd century BC, the Indian ruler embraced the new religion and spread it across his vast territory. He saw it as a way to bring peace to his people, but his decision had much more far-reaching consequences. It gave momentum and authority to a religious movement that would spread to every corner of the globe over the next two millennia.

About 400 years after Buddha was born in Lumbini, the Buddhist faith was being practiced by a relatively small group of followers in the Ganges valley, who had split into various schools. Emperor Ashoka was drawn to the teachings of Buddha that they spread, particularly those of social justice.

Historical sources tell us that Ashoka had been left traumatised by the huge death toll of a war he had waged. In Buddhism, he saw a new path where he could conquer minds and hearts with morality rather than weapons. He believed that if all of his subjects followed this same peaceful religion, he could end conflict across his lands.



**International pilgrims worship at the Great Stupa of Sanchi, more than two thousand years after Ashoka planted the seeds for Buddhism's spread around the world.**

To help spread his message around the Indian subcontinent, Ashoka erected stupas and other monuments with inscriptions. Over the centuries, most have been badly damaged or destroyed – although some still exist. The Great Stupa at Sanchi stands out as not just the best preserved of them all, but also the most beautiful. It is not just a testament to Ashoka's story, but is still worshipped today as an incredible piece of ancient art.

The Great Stupa at Sanchi sits at the top of a peaceful hill, easily seen from the surrounding areas without overshadowing the landscape. It's located about 10 kilometres from the city of Vidisha, which was a wealthy trading city at the time of the stupa's construction. Probably more importantly, though, Vidisha is also said to be the hometown of a woman that Ashoka fell in love with. She couldn't follow him back to the capital to be his queen and it's believed that influenced his decision to build his tribute in this location.

The Great Stupa's dome is more than 16 metres high and 36 metres in diameter (having been expanded over the centuries). Aside from its size, one of the first things that strikes you when you arrive is the detailed rock carvings that adorn the gateways at the four cardinal points. These were added after the death of Emperor Ashoka and show intricate scenes, including from the life of Buddha and the history of Buddhism.

Around the Great Stupa are smaller stupas, as well as the remains of later temples and monasteries. After Emperor Ashoka built his monument here in the 3rd century BC, this became an important place of worship for many centuries to come. You can see here the evidence of Buddhist activity here until at least the 12th century AD.

Further afield, there are other important Buddhist monuments that are easily reachable from Sanchi, including the impressive stupas at Satdhara and Sonari. The area continued to be an important centre for trade and faith, even as the dominance of different religions rose and fell.

As you travel in the region around Sanchi and the city of Bhopal, you will find other significant sites with stunning works of art. There are also the artworks left on rock faces from people who lived here thousands of years before Buddha was born or Ashoka embraced his message and spread it to the world.



## The artwork of Sanchi

The four gateways to the Great Stupa are famed for the beauty of their intricate carvings - and knowing what they represent offers a deeper understanding of the Sanchi site. The gateways, or 'toranas', were built in the 1st century BC and were sponsored by different lay worshippers. Each was carved by various craftspeople at different times, giving them slightly varied styles.

Each of the gateways has two square pillars with a set of four lions, elephants, or pot-bellied dwarves supporting a large grid with three architraves. Between the architraves are figures of horsemen and elephants. But it's the architraves themselves that offer us the most, with incredibly-detailed scenes carved into the rock.



**One of the four gateways that sit at the cardinal points around the Great Stupa of Sanchi and have the intricate carvings on the architraves**

The southern gateway shows an image of the Stupa of Ramagrama near Lumbini, the only one of the stupas with original relics of Buddha that Emperor Ashoka did not open. It also shows scenes from the Siege of Kushinagar and the story of Chhaddanta Jataka, a previous incarnation of Buddha.



The western gateway also shows a scene from the Siege of Kushinagar and another part of the story of Chhaddanta Jataka. It also has carvings depicting Buddha's first sermon and his enlightenment.



**The carvings on the western gateway include scenes of Buddha's first sermon and his enlightenment.**



**The northern gateway has scenes that include the Chhaddanta Jataka and Sujata's offering with the temptation by Mara.**

At the eastern gateway, you can see images of Buddha leaving his home at Kapilavastu to begin his journey to enlightenment. Importantly, there is also a scene of Emperor Ashoka visiting the Bodhi tree where the enlightenment occurred. This carving, coming at least a hundred years after the Great Stupa was built, is an important tribute to both Buddha and the man who so passionately embraced his teachings.

## Buddhism around Sanchi

The stupas and monasteries at Sanchi created a thriving Buddhist community of monks and supporters. As more people came over the centuries, other settlements were founded nearby, and the region became a hub of spiritual activity.

One of the most important settlements was at Satdhara, about 17 kilometres from Sanchi. There would once have been about 30 stupas and three monasteries here and, at its peak, Satdhara would have been home to about 100 monks. While the main stupa was probably originally constructed during Ashoka's rule, the rest of the site would have been built later.

You can see evidence of other stupas and settlements at nearby sites like Sonari, Andher and Murelkhurd. They show that the immediate effects of Emperor Ashoka's embrace of Buddhism were more than just ceremonial. He inspired many of his people to begin living their lives according to the teachings of the Buddha.

## The flow of faith

Although Emperor Ashoka achieved his aim of making Buddhism the dominant religion in the region, it did not last forever. By the 13th century AD, the community at Sanchi had been virtually abandoned and many of the monuments were falling into disrepair. It was not until the 19th century that the site would be rediscovered by those with an interest in restoring it.

Meanwhile, the growing Hindu community was founding its own centres of faith in the region, many of which are still covered with beautiful artwork. Jain worship sites were also set up at around the same time. Later, the Mughal Empire brought Islam to the region and mosques were built afresh or created by modifying existing temples.

Some of the most important sites of all these religions have been preserved and offer visitors a chance to see the development of faith in the region around



Sanchi in the millennia following its foundation. The places of worship are not just visually beautiful, they are also entwined with deep historical and cultural stories.

Emperor Ashoka's legacy is not measured purely by the spread of Buddhism around the world and its strength today. He also nurtured an artistic and spiritual environment around Sanchi that has evolved over many centuries and left us with a rich collection of historical treasures.



**The Bhojeshwar Temple at Bhojpur was built in the 12th century and is one of the finest Hindu temples in the region.**

### How to Get There

The nearest **airport** is in Bhopal city, the Raja Bhoj airport. Sanchi is 55 km north-east of Bhopal airport, which is well-connected with other airports like Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Raipur and Delhi.

The nearest **railhead** is Bhopal, which is also an important junction of the West Central Railways. It is also the terminus of the Shatabdi Express, which shuttles daily between Delhi and Bhopal. Various express trains ply between Bhopal and cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Agra, Gwalior, Jhansi and Ujjain. One can reach Bhopal by train and avail a bus / car from there for Sanchi.

Sanchi is just one hour **by car** from Bhopal (46 km) and 20 minutes drive from Vidisha (10 km). Various tour operators provide private taxis and cabs.

### When to Visit

Sanchi can be visited throughout the year, but it's best to visit in the months of July to April.

### Important

Kindly visit the Web Link to see:

- Other Attractions
- Experiences
- Legends
- Photos/Pictures & also,
- Sights and Attractions recommended by the locals

<https://visitworldheritage.com/en/buddha/buddhist-monuments-at-sanchi/a6e7eec5-fcc4-4a7a-823a-28c89416008f>

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### Archaeological Structure of the Mauryan Empire

<https://unacademy.com/content/nda/study-material/indian-history/archaeological-structure-of-the-mauryan-empire/>

This article highlights the various archaeological structures of the Mauryan empire, notably the history and architecture of Sanchi Stupa and Dhamek Stupa.

The Mauryan Empire, which controlled ancient India before the Christian era, is one of the world's earliest known empires. It is also renowned as one of India's few empires that produced some of the country's greatest rulers who strived for its upliftment and progress. Various historical monuments from the Mauryan Empire kings demonstrate their ambition and commitment to the country. With their capital at Pataliputra, modern-day Bihar, they attempted to expand their empire in the northwestern portions of the country, eventually reigning over more than half of the country during King Ashoka's reign.

## Sanchi Stupa

### **History:**

Ashoka, the founder of the Maurya dynasty, one of the world's greatest kings, placed the basic foundation of Sanchi Stupa. He ordered the construction of stupas to transport Lord Buddha's human bones in the third century BCE. The central chamber of this gigantic hemispherical dome, which stands 54 feet tall, contains Buddha's relics.

The current Sanchi Stupa is a hemispherical building with a double diameter. Queen Devi, Ashoka's wife, and Vidisha, their daughter, oversaw the monument's construction. A pillar made up of sandstone bearing the writings of Ashoka's Schism Edict and intricate spiral Brahmi letters depicting conch shells known as 'Shankhalipi' can also be seen. The lower section of the Sanchi Stupa design remains on the ground, while a Chattra canopy covers the upper part.

In 185 BCE, Pushyamitra Shunga, Mauryan Empire's commander, assassinated Brihadratha Maurya, the last Mauryan Empire king, and formed the Shunga Dynasty. The Stupa is thought to have been demolished during the Shunga Dynasty's reign in the second century BCE. Agnimitra, his son, later renovated it.

During the rule of the Shunga Dynasty, the Stupa was roughly doubled in size from its original dimensions. The real brick Stupa was covered by a flattened dome of stone slabs. Three shield structures are overlaid on the dome, symbolising Dharma's 'Wheel of Law.' The dome's seat is a tall, spherical drum that can be accessed through a double stairway.



## Architecture:

The architecture of Sanchi Stupa is admired across the globe. This location is also surrounded by some of Bhopal's most fascinating sights. The main characteristics of Sanchi Stupa are listed below:

- The domed structure green Anda represents the heap of soil that covered the remains of Lord Buddha.
- The oldest Stupas housed the Buddha's genuine relics, kept in a relic chamber called taberna, buried deep within the anda.
- With time, the semicircular mound has taken on the symbolic meaning of the gods' mountain home in the globe's centre.
- The mound of soil is surrounded by a square railing, indicating a consecrated burial area.
- The Chattra was removed from the weather-protecting umbrella built over the mound.
- The centre pillar that carries the umbrella was designed to reflect the pivot of the universe as the symbolic value of Anda grew over time.

## Where is Sanchi Stupa?

The Sanchi Stupa, a UNESCO World Heritage Site 46 kilometres northeast of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, is a key monument in charting the evolution of Indian architecture beginning with the Maurya dynasty. The Great Stupa in Sanchi, with its four decorative torans or entrances, attracts people from all over the globe who spend many hours marvelling at this Buddhist architectural wonder and the beauty of its statues. Because Sanchi is only a short distance from Bhopal, most people prefer to rent a cab to get to the Stupa complex because it is the quickest and most convenient method to get from the state capital.

## Dhamek Stupa:

### History:

Upon Lord Buddha's enlightenment, his mortal remains were dispersed and buried under eight mounds. The embers and urn were buried under two more mounds for ten such monuments containing Lord Buddha's relics. Although it was difficult to locate the original ten mounds containing Lord Buddha's relics due to a lack of

appropriate information about such ancient monuments, the Stupas at Sanchi and Sarnath are elaborative and aesthetic extensions of two such ancient mounds.

### Architecture:

- This huge Stupa is shaped like a cylinder and is constructed of red bricks and stone, with the lower portion covered in artistically attractive carved stones.
- The Stupa's foundation is thought to be from the Ashokan dynasty. The construction is encased in sandstone until it reaches a height of 11.2 m, with niches facing eight directions that may have formerly held images.
- Fine flower carvings adorn the stone facing beneath the niches, demonstrating a high level of stone artistry from the Gupta Dynasty.

### Conclusion

The old palace at Pataliputra, present Kumhrar in Patna, was the grandest monument of this time, built during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. Excavations have uncovered the ruins of the palace, which was supposed to be a collection of buildings, the most notable of which was an enormous pillared hall built on a high substratum of wood. There are 80 columns, each roughly 7 metres tall. According to Megasthenes' eyewitness description, the palace was made mostly of wood. It was thought to outshine the palaces of Susa and Ecbatana in terms of splendour and beauty, with gilded pillars ornamented with golden vines and silver birds.



# Complete List of the Pillars

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillars\\_of\\_Ashoka#:~:text=The%20pillars%20of%20Ashoka%20are,268%20to%20232%20BC.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillars_of_Ashoka#:~:text=The%20pillars%20of%20Ashoka%20are,268%20to%20232%20BC.)

Five of the pillars of Ashoka, two at **Rampurva**, one each at **Vaishali**, **Lauriya Araraj** and **Lauria Nandangarh** possibly marked the course of the ancient Royal highway from **Pataliputra** to **Nepal**. Several pillars were relocated by later **Mughal Empire** rulers, the animal capitals being removed.

The two Chinese medieval pilgrim accounts record sightings of several columns that have now vanished: **Faxian** records six and **Xuanzang** fifteen, of which only five at most can be identified with surviving pillars. All surviving pillars, listed with any crowning animal sculptures and the edicts inscribed, are as follows:

## Complete standing pillars, or pillars with Ashokan inscriptions



### Geographical spread of known pillar capitals.

- **Delhi-Topra pillar**, in the fortress of **Feroz Shah Kotla**, Delhi (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII); moved in AD 1356 from **Topra Kalan** in **Yamunanagar** district of **Haryana** to Delhi by **Firuz Shah Tughluq**.
- **Delhi-Meerut, Delhi ridge, Delhi** (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI); moved from **Meerut** to **Delhi** by **Firuz Shah Tughluq** in 1356.



- [Nigali Sagar](#) (or Nigлива, Nigalihawa), near [Lumbini, Nepal](#). Pillar missing capital, one Ashoka edict. Erected in the 20th regnal year of Ashoka (c. 249 BC).
- [Rupandehi](#), near [Lumbini, Nepal](#). Also erected in the 20th regnal year of Ashoka (c. 249 BC), to commemorate Ashoka's pilgrimage to [Lumbini](#). Capital missing, but was apparently a horse.<sup>[1]</sup>
- [Allahabad pillar](#), Uttar Pradesh (originally located at [Kausambi](#) and probably moved to Allahabad by [Jahangir](#); Pillar Edicts I-VI, Queen's Edict, Schism Edict).
- [Rampurva, Champaran, Bihar](#). Two columns: a lion with Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI; a bull without inscriptions. The [abacus](#) of the bull capital features [honeysuckle](#) and [palmette](#) designs derived from Greek designs.
- [Sanchi](#), near [Bhopal](#), Madhya Pradesh, four lions, Schism Edict.
- [Sarnath](#), near [Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh](#), four lions, Pillar Inscription, Schism Edict. This is the famous "[Lion Capital of Ashoka](#)" used in the national emblem of [India](#).
- [Lauriya-Nandangarth](#), Champaran, Bihar, single lion, Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI.
- [Lauriya Araraj](#), Champaran, Bihar (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI).
- [Vaishali, Bihar](#), single lion, with no inscription.

The [Amaravati](#) pillar fragment is rather problematic. It consists of only six lines in [Brahmi](#) which are hardly decipherable. Only the word *vijaya* (victory) can be made out, arguably a word also used by Ashoka. [Sircar](#), who provides a detailed study, considers it as probably belonging to an Ashokan pillar.



# UPON THIS ROCK

<https://caravanmagazine.in/essay/upon-this-rock-ashoka-edicts>

What the stone edicts of Ashoka tell us about India's great  
Buddhist ruler



A part of Ashoka's message inscribed on rock at  
Erragudi in Andhra Pradesh.

**NAYANJOT LAHIRI**

01 July, 2015

**THERE IS NOTHING ESPECIALLY STRIKING** about the cluster of rocks which crowns the edge of a low hilly ridge near the village of Erragudi in the Andhra region. From a distance, the cluster appears unremarkable, while the ridge on which it sits is somewhat bare, rising out of a patchwork of cultivated fields and sparsely dotted with vegetation. The rocks on it stand a mere 30 metres or so above the plains.

Cascading down the rocks is a dramatic waterfall of words. More than a hundred lines in the ancient Brahmi script are imprinted across several of the boulders. Large portions of this scrawl are exceedingly clear, the characters boldly etched across the rock face. Some segments have deteriorated, while a few of the lines have been defaced by modern graffiti. Yet not even the English and Telugu scribbles of contemporary visitors can diminish the overwhelming impression of messages from antiquity created by the profusion of these ancient words. This copious transcription is part of a royal enunciation. The words and phrases that comprise it were composed

by and inscribed at the instructions of Ashoka, the sorrowless one, the third emperor of the dynasty of the Mauryas, and ruler of a terrain that stretched, at one point, from Taxila in the north-west to Kalinga in the east.

Some 2,200 years ago, Ashoka made himself visible through the words that he caused to be inscribed at Erragudi, as well as at scores of other places across India and beyond. They represented an extraordinary democratic innovation—no ruler before him appears to have thought it necessary, or found the technology, to speak directly to his or her subjects. In keeping with Ashoka’s territorial ambitions, the scale of this project was truly imperial. The edicts were inscribed and installed across his lands, often in more than one language. A large and adept provincial administration helped carry his voice out to his subjects. They may even have reached those on the borders of the empire, an important consideration for a monarch who had undergone a religious conversion—one of the most famous in world history—and wished to reassure all people that the path of his dhamma was open to anyone who wished to follow its precepts with the right morals and true zeal. He transformed the way in which the state communicated with its people; in doing so, he hoped to transform the state itself.

These inscriptions also represent a kind of historical daybreak, ending a long phase of faceless rulers in the Indian subcontinent. In approximately 600 BCE, kings emerged out of the realms of tradition to set up and rule over several kingdoms stretching from the highlands of the north-west frontier to the lowlands of the Ganges, and southwards across the Vindhya mountains to the Godavari River on the Deccan Plateau. There were kings of greater or lesser power, rulers who were aspirants to the appellation “chief king of all kings,” and influential confederate clans.

Over a relatively short period of time—roughly coinciding with the domination of Athens in the classical period—a large part of this profusion of political entities was absorbed into a single imperial realm. From Magadha, in the middle Gangetic plains of Bihar, a succession of kings ruled over this empire, which straddled large parts of India. The first of these was the imperial house of the Nandas; they were followed by the Mauryas. From the fourth century BCE till the advent of Ashoka, circa 269 or 268 BCE, there were said to have been 11 monarchs, nine in the Nanda dynasty followed by the two Maurya kings who preceded Ashoka: Chandragupta, Ashoka’s grandfather, who overthrew the Nandas and founded the new dynasty, followed by Bindusara, Ashoka’s father.

But though king succeeded king and one century followed another, the only evidence we have of those times are the versions of them preserved in surviving accounts by others—some accurate, others fanciful, and practically never contemporary to their lives. These remaining records are the Puranas, certain Buddhist and Jaina texts, and histories of a sort by people who are referred to as “classical authors,” mainly literate companions in Alexander’s entourage—as also the famous Megasthenes, who visited the court of Chandragupta. These sources provide us with nearly all the information that we now have of India’s rulers and states in that antique time.



The rulers themselves failed to speak to their subjects, and therefore to us. Many of their names, and those of their principalities, are known: Janaka of Videha, Pasenadi of Kosala, the Magadha monarch Bimbisara, Pradyota of Avanti. But how such kings defined their domains and powers, how they appeared to their subjects, what they and their queens donated, and what kind of worship prevailed in their courts—these remain hidden, because no royal epigraphs or labelled sculptures, no coins carrying royal portraiture or the names of kings and queens, not even palaces, or communications emanating from such places and people, have endured.

But in his stone messages, we encounter Ashoka himself speaking about the several watersheds of his royal life, and we witness how he recreated his own path while trying to remould the lives of people in his empire, and beyond. Candour and emotion, death and decimation, honest admissions and imperious orders—all of these are found in the Ashokan edicts. Since his messages were not inscribed all at once but over many years, it becomes possible to examine Ashoka's persona not as that of a static sovereign, but an emperor of uncommon and evolving ambition.

In his stone messages, we encounter Ashoka himself speaking about the several watersheds of his royal life, and we witness how he recreated his own path while trying to remould the lives of people in his empire, and beyond.

Through these missives, Ashoka literally carved out a presence for himself. We encounter him on rocks and pillars right across India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He chose to ensure that his administration sent out multiple copies of his messages. That he wanted to be heard in the same way in Afghanistan and in Andhra, in Karnataka and in Kalinga, also means that Ashoka's version of his life and deeds is the one that was likely the best known, certainly during his own lifetime. There is no other example, in fact, of an ancient ruler whose voice, in the course of his own life, resonated in such a unique way across South Asia and further afield, articulating the shifting contours of his imperial aspirations.

**IN HIS EARLY YEARS,** it is a virtual certainty that Ashoka was very much within the ideal mould of kingship enshrined in the ancient text of the *Arthashastra*. This was grounded in military success and the building of a vast empire. Because of his conquering ambitions, and their consequences, Ashoka, who until this point seemed remote to the point of invisibility, becomes historical and real. The first event of his reign that Ashoka chose to mention in his edicts was a major military expedition he led. This was the assault, in approximately 260 BCE, on Kalinga, a state on the eastern seaboard of India, in what now forms part of modern Odisha and Andhra Pradesh.



**Ashoka, with his wife, depicted on a stone panel of the second-century CE Kanaganahalli Stupa in Karnataka. He is identified here as "Raya Asoko." ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA**

His ambitions were cultivated, and realised, in an age of war and territorial aggrandisement. Take the specific time of Ashoka's march: it happened a little after Rome began its extended conflict against Carthage with the first of the three Punic Wars, which, all told, lasted more than a hundred years, between 264 and 146 BCE. Some 300 years before Ashoka, the army of the Persian Empire, with its centre in what is now Iran, crossed into Europe, and also stamped its authority across regions that stretched from Turkey in the west to north-west India in the east. Persia was the first superpower of its time, and, about two centuries later, its model inspired Alexander's successful emulation. Starting from his small kingdom of Macedon, near Athens, he crushed revolts in several Greek cities before leading an expeditionary force that annexed kingdoms in Africa and Asia, extending from Egypt to Persia, and eventually defeated adversaries as far east as Punjab.

When Alexander died in his thirties, this vast empire, difficult to hold effectively at the best of times, quickly broke up into smaller realms. In Egypt, one of his generals became the satrap and founder of a new dynasty. The fourteen kings of this dynasty, all bearing the name Ptolemy, ruled Egypt for almost three centuries. By the time of Ashoka's consecration, the early Ptolemies had ensured that

Egypt was the principal naval power of the eastern Mediterranean. In those parts of Asia which lay to the east and north-east of India, similar kinds of consolidation would soon commence. Some 15 years after Ashoka's Kalinga march, King Zheng, later the first emperor of the Qin dynasty, came to power, and by 221 BC, after conquering rival states, he presided over the unification of China around a centralised bureaucratic monarchy.

Given all these conflicts and rivalries, it is hardly surprising that a considerable part of the history of the ancient world is written about war. Homer, in about the eighth century BCE, relating incidents around the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans, and Herodotus, in the fifth century BCE, writing of the expanding Achaemenid empire of Persia, are probably the best-known chroniclers of ancient conquest—Homer more poetic and Herodotus more gossipy and historical.

Why wars were thought necessary at all is a question which strikes us immediately and forcefully, but we dismiss it out of hand as foolish because of many of the precepts outlined in treatises such as the *Arthashastra*—that power must lie in the hands of powerful and capable men at the apex of armies, that the sustenance of dominion requires the expansion of power via these men and their armies because the alternative is loss of dominion and enslavement. Beyond this worldview, of competitive imperialism as necessary to survival, lie other causes, such as the predominantly male desire to acquire goods and land, food and women. In the Warring States period of Chinese history, in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, we see that controlling territory became crucial to the consolidation of political domination. Over much of ancient history, territorial expansion also ensured enormous economic benefit. The acquisitions of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II, circa the ninth century BC, are an example. Even among his smaller campaigns, the booty included 40 chariots with men and horses, 460 horses, 120 pounds of silver, 120 pounds of gold, 6,000 pounds of lead, 18,000 pounds of iron, 1,000 vessels of copper, 2,000 heads of cattle, 5,000 sheep, 15,000 slaves, and the defeated ruler's sister.

How much of this *Weltanschauung* formed the mental horizons of Ashoka cannot be specifically known, but conquerors and kings from the West were very much part of political happenings in South Asia at the time his grandfather captured power. So the possibility of this emperor having been influenced by the world beyond South Asia is very far from remote. Plutarch, in his biographical history of Alexander, writes that Chandragupta, when a mere lad, saw Alexander in person. When he began to rule from Pataliputra, embassies from the Western powers came to his court; later, in Bindusara's years as sovereign, they were present again. (A charming story told about him and Antiochus I of Syria highlights this: the Indian monarch asked for sweet wine, dried figs, and a sophist—a teacher in the classical Greek tradition—to which Antiochus's reply was that while figs and wine would be sent, it was forbidden by law to sell a sophist.)

Ashoka's expedition to Kalinga was preceded by massive and careful arrangements, from ascertaining the strength of the enemy's forces and understanding the terrain through which the army would move to deciding on the season best suited to the operation. In a territory as hot as Kalinga was for most of the year, winter was



considered the best time to begin. This would ensure the optimal use of animals such as elephants, an integral part of the Mauryan army. We do not have Ashoka's version of the size and character of the fighting force that he led, but if our knowledge of Chandragupta's forces is extrapolated to assess the grandson's, Ashoka's army had units of archers, foot guards armed with spears, combat commanders, horses, and large numbers of elephants under the control of mahouts. Weaponry and war paraphernalia—maces, catapults, spears, swords, bows and arrows, giant stone catapulting machines—were likely to have been transported in bullock trains, which would also have carried provisions. Imperial armies moved slowly, and given the size of the contingent and the terrain the daily distance covered by Ashoka's army is unlikely to have exceeded an average of twenty kilometres. From Pataliputra to Kalinga is a distance of some 900 kilometres, so just getting to the target ground would have taken five or six weeks.



**A view of the Daya river from the Dhuli hills in Odisha. This is presumed to be the site of the Kalinga war, fought around 260 BCE. CHENI / CC BY-SA-3.0**

Modern historians have variously imagined how the army reached Kalinga. Was the battlefield approached along a route that hugged the right bank of the Ganga, through Bengal to Midnapur, from where the Mahanadi Delta is easily approached? This had been, for centuries, a pilgrim path well trodden by the devout making their way to the shrine of Jagannatha in the coastal town of Puri. Or did the army cross Chhattisgarh to reach the Ganjam–Srikakulam coastal belt on the southern edge of Kalinga, this having been the line of movement of the later Samudragupta (c. 328–78 CE, another

emperor from Pataliputra) to this state, which he invaded as he marched to conquer the southern regions?

The size and strength of the defending force is also very much in the realm of speculation. The account of its brutal decimation suggests it was considerable. The scale of the slaughter, death and deportation resulting from the war is vividly described in the epigraph which records the carnage: "One hundred and fifty thousand in number were the men who were deported thence, one hundred thousand in number were those who were slain there, and many times as many those who died."

The triumph is recorded as a disaster. Defeat is snatched from the jaws of victory. A chronicle of imperial misfortune is concocted in defiance of the established practice of all preceding time. The emperor weeps when he ought to swagger.

Many who perished fought for the Kalinga ruler. Others, rather more ordinary and outside the arena of war were badly affected too—innocent civilians whose lives, described as principled and virtuous, were violently interrupted by the bloodbath. The epigraph speaks of these hapless victims as well, and deplors the collateral damage. Reconstructed in English, it reads:

(To) the Brahmanas or Sramanas, or other sects or householders, who are living there, (and) among whom the following are practised: obedience to those who receive high pay, obedience to mother and father, obedience to elders, proper courtesy to friends, acquaintances, companions and relatives, to slaves and servants, (and) firm devotion—to these then happen injury or slaughter or deportation of (their) beloved ones.

Or, if there are then incurring misfortune the friends, acquaintances, companions and relatives of those whose affection (for the latter) is undiminished, although they are (themselves) well provided for, this (misfortune) as well becomes an injury to those (persons) themselves.

This is shared by all men and is considered deplorable ...

This is only part of a longer account which marks a famous change of heart. Ashoka's utter uniqueness is that in this, the one and only record that he caused to be made of a successful war, the conventions of state propaganda are turned on their head. The triumph is recorded as a disaster. Defeat is snatched from the jaws of victory. A chronicle of imperial misfortune is concocted in defiance of the established practice of all preceding time. The emperor weeps when he ought to swagger. This reversal is now so well known that we hardly see it any longer for what in essence it was, and remains: a staggering overturning of the very conception of kingship.





**A rock-cut A elephant at Dhauili, sculpted above a major set of Ashoka's rock edicts. However, the edicts do not commemorate the battle of Kalinga—that message was inscribed elsewhere.**

The account graphically captures Ashoka's pain and repentance in his hour of victory. Remarkably, it is also the only surviving contemporary description of the catastrophe. Such narratives are scarcely known to have endured from ancient times down to ours; the original records of those who accompanied and recorded Alexander's campaign in India, for instance, have disappeared. Against this, the narrative of the killing fields of Kalinga was created within a few years of the battle, and can still be read in the script and language in which it was first composed.



A long litany of kings after Ashoka had their military accomplishments eulogised in dramatic verse and prose, foregrounding them even in records to which they may have been tangential. In the first century BCE, Kharavela of Kalinga, even while recording donations to the Jaina community, describes at length how he forced various rulers into submission. Rudradaman's second-century CE account of the repair of a dam in Junagadh simultaneously sketches, in some detail, all the various territories, ranging from Sindhu-Sauvira to Saurashtra and Aparanta, that he valorously gained. By contrast, in Ashoka's edict, the compassionate and caring king is born, and proclaims himself, as the writer HG Wells recognised, for the first time in world history.

**THE RESULT OF THE KALINGA WAR** radically redirected Ashoka's entire subsequent life and career. The personal upheaval was, perhaps inadvertently, also a powerful and new political idea: by replacing subjugation with compassion as the fundamental principle of monarchy, it introduced the earliest glimmerings of a rule of law, in which ordinary folk and the citizenry, rather than only the elites and royalty, were consequential. If one were, for a moment, to visualise the scenario symbolically, it could take the shape of Ashoka calling for a copy of the *Arthashastra* and setting it on fire in full public view.

The emperor evidently imagined that his subjects would recognise him by his titles alone. In most edicts, he was alluded to only as "Devanampiya"—dear to the gods—or "Devanampiya Piyadasi"—dear to the gods and one who looks affectionately or amiably.

The reception of any message, and most certainly a royal one, has a great deal to do with the circumstances of its articulation. How was Ashoka's voice likely to have been understood by those who heard and read his words? As there are no references or reactions to Ashoka's edicts in any class of India's ancient literature of the first millennium BCE, our reconstruction has to be rooted in historical conjecture. Much Brahmanical writing of the late centuries BCE deals with codes of conduct, paraphernalia pertaining to rituals, norms of social behaviour, and the law. Events such as the composition of kingly communiqués and citizens' reactions to them were never going to find mention. Nor were the Buddhist texts of the time primarily concerned with kings who patronised Buddhism. They were preoccupied with the Buddha's discourses, his previous births, and do's and don't's for monks and nuns. No account by any ambassador from a neighbouring kingdom of that era has yet turned up.

If an *Indica* had been written around Ashoka's reign, containing information of the kind Megasthenes recorded about Chandragupta, public reactions to the emperor's messages may well have featured. All the same, some glimpses can be arrived at by juxtaposing the message with the cultural landscape. Ashoka's empire was spread out over thousands of square kilometres, and administering this entity required regular communication with its provinces. These were frequently governed by princes of the royal family. Ashoka himself had served as Bindusara's viceroy at Ujjayini, and seems to have maintained the practice of delegating close male kin to run the provincial bulwarks of his empire. Directions and orders were frequently given to these local

functionaries through edicts. Their centrality can be gauged from the fact that directives for both peace and war appear within these proclamations. The decrees also include commands by the king concerning punishment and favour, gifts and exemptions, authorisations for issuing orders and carrying out certain required works. The Arthashastra considers it necessary for such communiqués to be written with clarity, and prescribes the employment of literate scribes with beautiful handwriting who “should listen with an attentive mind to the command of the king and set it down in writing.”

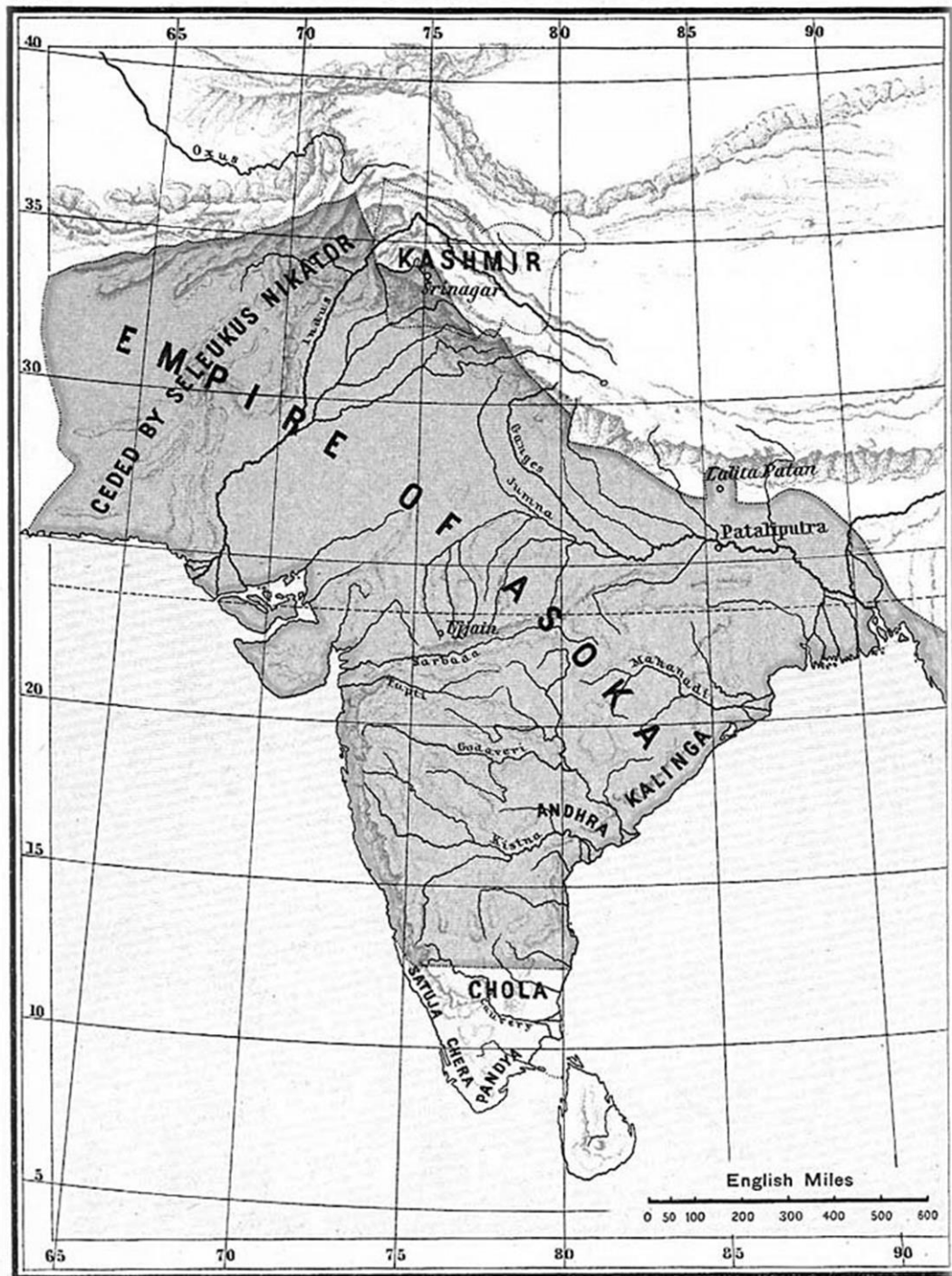
The importance of royal communications is in inverse proportion to what remains of them: no messages of any kind from before Ashoka have survived. The usual materials used for writing were palm leaf, birch-bark (or “bhurjapatra”), cotton cloth, and possibly wooden boards. These are mentioned in several textual sources and, being all highly perishable, specimens have never been discovered, bar an exception related to the settlement of Sringaverapura near the banks of the Ganga, where wood charcoal of some bhurjapatra from the early first millennium BCE was found in an archaeological context

It is likely that some of Ashoka’s official communications were recorded on the product of such bark and leaf. The stone inscriptions, then, were a major post-Kalinga revolution in communication. These have survived remarkably well: found some 2,200 years after they were carved, several appear in much the state they were when created. The survival of an ancient document in the shape and the place it was originally inscribed is in itself unusual. After all, available accounts about Alexander date to more than 300 years after his death, even though we know he went to great lengths to ensure he was remembered, even appointing an official historian for the purpose.

Glimpses of the messages that Ashoka first sent out to his provinces to be inscribed on his instructions can still be seen at a large number of their original locations, because they were engraved on immovable rocks and boulders. There is much variety in the kinds of surface upon which they were inscribed. Some are on flattish horizontal rock faces, as at Rajula Mandagiri in the Kurnool district in Andhra and near Srinivaspuri in Delhi. Others, such as those at Maski and Nittur in Karnataka, are engraved on vertical surfaces. The rocks are sometimes easily accessible, as at Bairat in the Jaipur district of Rajasthan, where the boulder is at the foot of a hill; and in the case of the rock face on which the Erragudi edict in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh is engraved. Some are more difficult to reach, such as the inscribed slab at Sasaram, located on top of the hill in the Rohtas district of Bihar; and the one at Palkigundu, in the Koppal district of Karnataka, which crowns a high and fairly inaccessible ridge and can only be reached after negotiating a very steep elevation.

2.

## INDIA in 250 B. C.



Justus Perthes, Gotha.

### The lay of the Ashokan empire in the third century BCE.

The medium that came to be used for inscribing royal epigraphs in early India depended upon the message and the audience addressed. Two demi-official epigraphs of Mauryan times, one from Mahasthangarh in Bangladesh and the other from Sohgaure in Uttar Pradesh, recorded instructions for the distribution of grain during drought and famine. The commands were intended for mahamatras, a category of administrators associated specifically with urban centres, and were inscribed on



plaques. More common are donative epigraphs, engraved into what was being dedicated, as with the first-century BCE king Kharavela's dedication of the Hathigumpha caves as quarters for Jain monks. Ashoka's early edicts were addressed to his administrators too, but were not meant only for them—from the very beginning, the messages were more democratically motivated, for communication to his subjects in general. It seems logical to assume that the officials engraved the emperor's words on rocks located in areas that were frequented or commonly accessed at the time.

The epigraphs were mainly in the Brahmi script, while the language used was mostly an amalgam of Prakrit dialects, a language with which administrative functionaries would have been familiar. Prakrit, however, was not likely to have been the language spoken in regions such as Karnataka and Andhra. So when these messages were transmitted to the people in such regions, for the meaning of the message to be intelligible it was translated into the local language.

The edicts also demonstrate a second innovation in communication: each message that Ashoka sent out to his administrators in the scattered parts of his empire was in a form more or less identical. In the modern world, where it is possible to present the same text to large numbers of people within a very short time, the novelty of this may not be immediately obvious. In ancient India, where the technology for multiple reproductions did not exist, the state could not reach out and express its desires and directives in the way it does now. So the emperor's method was an attempt at text-based mass communication, a kind of force multiplier which ensured that the message reached far and wide. Usually, when we think of culture in ancient India as text-created, it is formalised religious iconography that comes to mind—images that depict textual narratives, such as the themes and characters of the *Ramayana* portrayed in different places in India in the first millennium CE. Here, by contrast, a ruler attempts to create an image of himself via his words—the same image, with a singularity of voice.

The message would have been composed on the orders of the emperor, at points in time when he was possibly on tour, first written out on materials which have since perished. It was then dispatched to various administrative centres. In each instance, it is likely that the message was sent to a prince who was the viceroy of the province, and who, in turn, re-addressed and conveyed it to officials in his territory for onward dissemination. We know this because in one instance, where three versions of an edict are found within a few

kilometres of each other, the subsidiary instructions and greetings from the provincial head have also been inscribed. These three form a cluster in the Chitradurga district of Karnataka, at Brahmagiri, Siddapura, and Jatinga-Rameshwara. All of them note that the prince, described as an *aryaputra*—a designation suggesting that the man addressed was Ashoka's own son—and the officials, the mahamatras from Suvarnagiri—the capital of the southern province of the empire—wished the mahamatras at Isila good health. The message that follows is much the same as elsewhere. Transcribing the address by the dispatcher to the recipient was obviously a mistake made when the edicts were engraved. However, thanks to this ancient error, we have a rare glimpse into the mode of transmission of the message.

**THE PROVINCIAL FUNCTIONARIES** and engravers who were most materially responsible for transmitting Ashoka's messages are shadowy figures. One exception is a character who signed off on the three texts in Chitradurga. Presumably, he was the *lipikara* or writer-clerk, who prepared the exemplar from which the rock engravings were made. The scribe's name was Capada, something that is mentioned in all three edicts. It does not necessarily mean he was the engraver, who is more likely to have been a literate workman; even more likely, the job involved several workmen, for though the three texts were inscribed within a few kilometres of each other the engraving hands are different. Instead of Brahmi—the script used in the main part of the edict—Capada chose to use, for his own signature, Kharoshthi, a language frequently used in the area of Gandhara, around the upper Indus and Swat valleys in present-day north Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan. Capada may have used Kharoshthi to show his dexterity with scripts, and also perhaps to signal that he either hailed from or was in some way linked with north-west India. The engravers inscribed his signature along with the emperor's message, and so immortalised his name.

While other clerks or engravers are not visible in the same way, sometimes the style of engraving attracts our attention to the particularity of their skill. One such person was the engraver of the Erragudi edict in Andhra. When inscribing Ashoka's message, he made part of it bidirectional. This segment is boustrophedonic—using a form of writing often found in remains in ancient Greece, in which the lines, rather than following one direction, turn right to left and left to right. Was this unnamed person using the rock surface to suggest that he was familiar with other writing systems? Kharoshthi was the only regional script written from right to left, so was the engraver indicating a more cosmopolitan knowledge of scripts? And why did he give up writing in this way after a few lines? The rest of the text, in fact, was rather haphazardly put down on the remaining space, with no concession to readability at all. There is no clear answer to why he did this. What is certain is that every official who expected to read or translate this engraving would, instead of marvelling at the engraver's skill, have roundly cursed the fellow for his rotten cursive. Boustrophedon is not exactly easy on the eye.

The emperor himself evidently imagined that his subjects would recognise him by his titles alone. In most edicts, he was alluded to only as "Devanampiya"—dear to the gods—or "Devanampiya Piyadasi"—dear to the gods and one who looks affectionately or amiably. In some provinces, though, the administrators in charge of propagating the emperor's messages added his name to it. In Maski in Karnataka and Gujjara in central India, he is mentioned by name as "Asoka" and "Asoka raja," respectively. In all likelihood, the local administrator believed that the people hearing or reading the words needed clarity on the identity of Devanampiya.

The quality and the quirks of writers and engravers, and what was inadvertently or consciously added to the epigraphic text by local officials, represent only one part of the story. Even if Ashoka's messages were inscribed, their dissemination was primarily oral, and the responsibility of specially designated officials who conveyed them through public readings. That orality was central to these spectacles is evident from how frequently we encounter the proclamatory phrase, "Devanampriya speaks thus." It draws attention to the fact that what had been written had first been spoken, and

that the speaker, being the emperor, had to be carefully listened to. Living in faraway Pataliputra, the monarch was compensating for his absence.

We cannot be certain whether local administrators adapted to Ashoka's changes by appointing, for example, officials with the rhetorical skills necessary for readings. Were there many officials who could both read well and recite powerfully? Considering the oral culture of early India, it is very possible that even if doing both was a novel experience for Mauryan functionaries they may have attempted to render a public discourse by the emperor in a style similar to that deployed by poets addressing an audience. The difference between an oral performance by a poet-entertainer and a functionary carrying out the orders of the ruler would have been mainly in the content—a political rather than literary agenda—with the manner of address perhaps more declamatory and officious in tone. In any case, the edicts must have represented a significant change in the social and administrative interactions between the people and the state. It was a political transformation that was deeply informed, and occasioned, by the great intellectual and spiritual transformation of the emperor himself.



**The Sanchi stupa in Madhya Pradesh, originally commissioned by Ashoka. The emperor's deepening Buddhist fervour, linked with his remorse following the Kalinga war, marks one of the most famous intellectual and spiritual transformations in world history.**

**ASHOKA'S EARLIEST PUBLIC COMMUNICATION** has survived in the very form in which it was put down in the third century BCE, on a rock at Rupnath, and it gives us a good idea of how the emperor set about the business for which he is best known. The Rupnath edict gives a good sense of what Ashoka thought worthy of recounting and communicating to his subjects: not matters of state, but the state of his mind.



Following the battle of Kalinga, he has become a Buddhist. This was, as we know, a consequence of a personal upheaval following the scale of killing he witnessed there. His metamorphosis needs to be understood and emulated. So it is the process and the consequences of his conversion that he highlights. The edict reads:

Devanampriya speaks thus.

Two and a half years and somewhat more (have passed) since I am openly a Shakya.

But (I had) not been very zealous.

But a year and somewhat more (has passed) since I have visited the Samgha and have been very zealous.

Those gods who during that time had been unmingled (with men) in Jambudvipa, have now been made (by me) mingled (with them).

For this is the fruit of zeal.

And this cannot be reached by (persons) of high rank (alone), (but) even a lowly (person) is able to attain even the great heaven if he is zealous.

And for the following purpose has (this) proclamation been issued, (that) both the lowly and the exalted may be zealous, and (that) even (my) borderers may know (it), (and) that this same zeal may be of long duration.

For, this matter will (be made by me to) progress, and will (be made to) progress considerably; it will (be made to) progress to at least one and a half.

And cause ye matter to be engraved on rocks where an occasion presents itself.

And (wherever) there are stone pillars here, it must be caused to be engraved on stone pillars.

And according to the letter of this (proclamation) (You) must dispatch (an officer) everywhere, as far as your district (extends).

(This) proclamation was issued by (me) on tour.

256 (nights had then been) spent on tour.

This first edict, made when Ashoka was in his forties, is also among his shortest. It is not part of a set of edicts, as those inscribed in later years were. The glimpse of the emperor's inner life is linked to a range of pronouncements about his mission. The message is partly confessional, presenting his self-realisation and organising it in a chronological pattern of development. The text was dispatched by the ruler in the midst of a long tour, it having been surmised that the presence of the number 256 in all versions of this message indicates the days or nights for which Ashoka had been

away from the royal capital, Pataliputra. This “date” also shows that all of these messages were dispatched more or less simultaneously.

The glimpse of the emperor's inner life is linked to a range of pronouncements about his mission. The message is partly confessional, presenting his self-realisation and organising it in a chronological pattern of development.

Perhaps because it captures an important moment in the life of Ashoka, the brevity and crowding are understandable. They betray an impatience in wanting to share what the metamorphosis meant for him as a ruler, and therefore ought to mean for his empire at large. There were good political reasons as well for sharing the information; it was more reasonable to expect his subjects to try and emulate him if they understood the context of his transformation. Let us try and understand the information and instructions contained in this imperial message, and see how they are interlinked.

Ashoka made grassroots contact with his people only after he became a Buddhist, there being no epigraphs showing this kind of intent during his pre-Buddhist phase. He appeared as a zealous Buddhist ruler across a large part of his empire in the north—Bairat, Delhi, Ahraura, Ratanpurwa and Sasaram—in central India—Gujjara and Rupnath—and in the Deccan, where, in fact, the most frequent articulation of his persona as a royal Buddhist convert came to be set down—this message being engraved in ten separate places there. He declared at the outset that he had become a Sakya, meaning a Buddhist, after the Buddha's well known title Sakyamuni. Elsewhere, in some versions of this message, he described himself as a lay follower, or upasake, of the Buddhist faith.

The Buddha and his best-known disciple, Ashoka, seem to have recognised that combating a system as powerful as Brahmanical Hinduism required the use, for different ends, of some of the same story-telling techniques.

Ashoka had become a lay worshipper some two and a half years earlier, he told his listeners, although he felt that initial formal adherence to the new faith was not sufficiently ardent. This seems to mean that Ashoka did not at first feel great interest in the morality of the religion. Instrumental in making Ashoka a zealous Buddhist, he revealed, was his association with the Sangha, the Buddhist mendicant order, a year and a half after he became a lay follower. Such congregations of monks and nuns were, by the third century BCE, known to exist in many parts of India. Precisely which branch of the Sangha enchanted him is not known, but the Mahabodhi branch, in the place where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment, is a definite possibility. We learn from a later Ashokan epigraph that the emperor visited Mahabodhi in the tenth year of his consecration, which can be inferred to coincide with the deepening of his religious beliefs. The other possibility is that his constant interaction with monasteries in and around Pataliputra caused him to feel more deeply about his new religion.

For the Sangha, the conversion of the region's most powerful man to a religion which the state had hitherto largely regarded as a philosophy of dissent against the Brahmanical faith was a coup of unimaginable magnitude. The closest parallel to this in the West is perhaps the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in the third century CE, whose adoption of the relatively new religion of Christianity—coincidentally, as with Ashoka and Buddhism, roughly 300 years after the birth of the religion—has sometimes been described as the transformation of the imperial state into the sacred state. Constantine occupies the same position in Christian ecclesiastical history that Ashoka does in the Sangha's versions of key moments in Buddhism's trajectory.

Ashoka's new-found ardour was demonstrated in two main ways. First, he drew attention to the eight months or so that he had spent touring—leading one to the surmise that he issued this first edict while on tour. Second, whereas in preceding times humans and gods had not mingled, now in Jambudvīpa—Ashoka's name for his empire—the king took credit for making their intermingling possible. This was a way of saying that by creating a shared moral universe for his people with their gods, the emperor had made Jambudvīpa a land of greater morality.



**A first- or second-century CE Buddha figure from the Gandhara region, integral to Ashoka's empire, now part of north Pakistan.**

In asserting this, Ashoka used a motif that occurs often in Buddhist literature, one that he must have picked up during his interaction with the Sangha. John Strong, a scholar of Buddhism, maintains that implicit in the first edict was the idea of a “double utopia,” in which gods and humans mingled on earth or later in heaven, and that this commingling resonated with what the Buddha himself is said to have created. Whether the notion was picked up by Ashoka from such texts, or whether this was plucked out by the Buddhist tradition from Ashoka's words, Strong points out, is not easy to answer. What seems likely, though, is that Ashoka used an idea well understood by people familiar with the faith of the Buddha. If they had not understood what the



commingling of gods and humans implied, he would have taken some pains to explain what he meant, as he did with so much else.

The emperor also suggested that this moral path was available to all those who followed his example, from the most humble to those who occupied high rank. In emphasising the possibility of equal access he was, quite evidently, following the Buddha himself, in positioning a new moral universe fundamentally different from the stratified hierarchy of the Brahmanical order. The cultural milieu of the first millennium BC usually emphasised social differentiation: the four varnas—Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras—were posited to have different innate characteristics and differential access to a variety of social goods, from occupation to justice. This was a relatively absolutist system of reservations, supposedly ordained by a primeval divinity and therefore inviolable. The individual acting against, or against the grain of, his status, was thus supposedly disobeying a sacred ordinance—an ordinance which had of course been created and perfected by the powerful and imposed upon the lowly, and largely internalised both by the lowly and by society at large.

For the Sangha, the conversion of the region's most powerful man to a religion which the state had hitherto largely regarded as a philosophy of dissent against the Brahmanical faith was a coup of unimaginable magnitude.

Modern interpretation and analysis has exposed this system as among the world's most effective hegemonies, because of how effectively it deployed gods and goddesses within great literary stories accorded the status of religious texts. Notwithstanding the efforts of Ashoka—and, in modern India, of BR Ambedkar—the creation of this social and cultural universe of supposedly sacred acts, examples and orders from heavenly beings who descend to the world of men—partly in order to reinforce the varna system—has never been seriously undermined. The Buddha and his best-known disciple, Ashoka, seem to have recognised that combating a system as powerful as Brahmanical Hinduism required the use, for different ends, of some of the same story-telling techniques. This meant ensuring that the Buddhist message, while asserting a socially inclusive view—both the lowly and the exalted could occupy the same moral plane, and achieve heaven, or *svarga*, equally—was delivered largely in ways that fell in line with prevailing notions of the sacred. In other words, it was new wine made headier by being poured out of an old and recognisable bottle.

Ashoka further suggested that, his own subjects apart, people on his borders learn about what moved him in this new direction. So we see that from the time he began communicating through edicts, he presented himself as a ruler not merely providing an example to his existing subjects, but equally to potential converts beyond the limits of his empire. There was nothing tentative about this mission; indeed, as Ashoka put it, the mission “will (be made to) progress considerably.” Ashoka made sure that the part of his life set out in stone was recorded to be exemplary. This was central to his missionary intent.

This was life-history as model and prototype; the new hegemonic enterprise shines through in his first edict as much as in those that follow. Implicitly, though, Ashoka

was interpreting his own life and behaviour in a way that would have reminded knowledgeable observers of crucial incidents within an earlier historical life. One cannot escape the strong feeling that there is in the emperor's autobiographical vignette some echo of Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha in the sixth century BCE. Siddhartha's decision to renounce worldly life, his later biographers underlined, was related to a personal trauma. Ashoka does not mention the Kalinga war and his post-war crisis in his first edict, but we cannot escape reading even this pithy tablet in the light of its transformative impact on the conqueror. Again, while the Buddha moved from being the head of his royal household to a wandering life in search of truth, the king's traditional calling as head of his "household," the state, changes to a moral mission. Like the wandering Buddha, who taught as he travelled, the converted Buddhist king embarks on his mission by touring his empire. His inclusive moral path is patently the Buddha's. Above all, just as the Buddha never failed to reveal personal experience as being the basis of his teachings, Ashoka's life and his new kingly calling are inextricably combined. The Buddha acquired disciples; Ashoka's disciples were, in a sense, the people of his administrative apparatus.

A king was not prone to confiding in his people. As a warrior and protector of his realm and subjects, as also a supreme arbitrator of their disputes, he was meant to project himself as powerful, not spiritual. The people may have had to be forgiven if they were confused by a king who, instead of proclaiming his strength via grandiloquent titles, alluded to himself, relatively humbly, as "beloved of the gods." The very thought of such a man being their ruler would have run contrary to the normal thought processes of the populace, which, on the odd occasion that it thought of him at all, perhaps only feared him as a kind of god at the apex of a tax-extracting administration backed up by an army—a dread lord. Villagers and townspeople would normally have been familiar only with local functionaries, not with the monarch. Now, through this novel intervention, the ruler had brought himself within the direct ambit of their world. The situation will have seemed bewildering, the imperial initiative without precedent.

*Adapted from Ashoka in Ancient India, published this month in South Asia by Permanent Black, and outside South Asia in August this year by Harvard University Press.*

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# Pillars of Ashoka

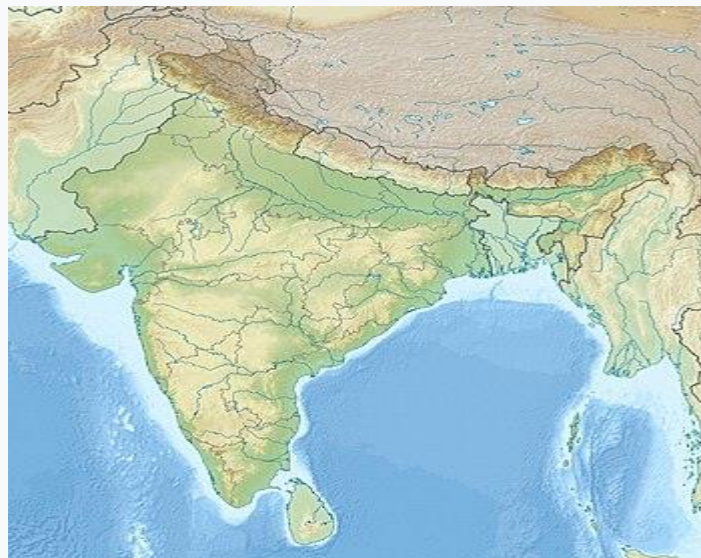
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillars\\_of\\_Ashoka#:~:text=The%20pillars%20of%20Ashoka%20are,268%20to%20232%20BC.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillars_of_Ashoka#:~:text=The%20pillars%20of%20Ashoka%20are,268%20to%20232%20BC.)

## Pillars of Ashoka



One of the Pillars of Ashoka, in Vaishali

<b>Material</b>	Polished <a href="#">sandstone</a>
<b>Period/culture</b>	3rd century BC



[Samath](#)

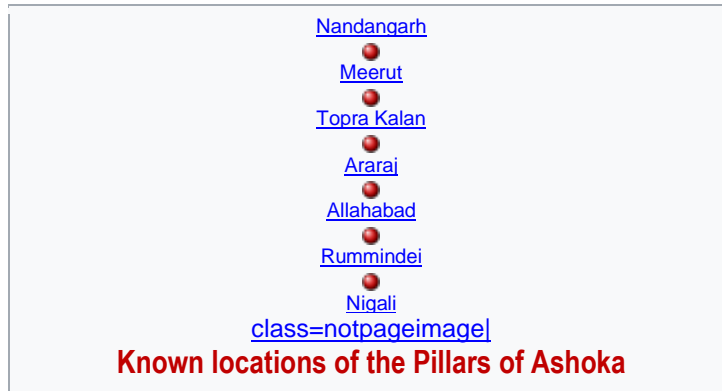
[Sanchi](#)

[Rampurva](#)

[Vaishali](#)

[Sankissa](#)





The **pillars of Ashoka** are a series of [monolithic](#) columns dispersed throughout the [Indian subcontinent](#), erected—or at least inscribed with [edicts](#)—by the 3rd [Mauryan](#) Emperor [Ashoka the Great](#), who reigned from c.268 to 232 BC.<sup>[2]</sup> Ashoka used the expression *Dhamma thambhā* ([Dharma stambha](#)), i.e. "pillars of the [Dharma](#)" to describe his own pillars. These pillars constitute important monuments of the [architecture of India](#), most of them exhibiting the characteristic [Mauryan polish](#). Twenty of the pillars erected by Ashoka still survive, including those with inscriptions of his edicts. Only a few with animal capitals survive of which seven complete specimens are known. Two pillars were relocated by [Firuz Shah Tughlaq](#) to [Delhi](#). Several pillars were relocated later by [Mughal Empire](#) rulers, the animal capitals being removed. Averaging between 12 and 15 m (40 and 50 ft) in height, and weighing up to 50 tons each, the pillars were dragged, sometimes hundreds of miles, to where they were erected.

The pillars of Ashoka are among the earliest known stone sculptural remains from India. Only another pillar fragment, the [Pataliputra capital](#), is possibly from a slightly earlier date. It is thought that before the 3rd century BC, wood rather than stone was used as the main material for Indian architectural constructions, and that stone may have been adopted following interaction with the [Persians](#) and the [Greeks](#). A graphic representation of the [Lion Capital of Ashoka](#) from the column there was adopted as the official [State Emblem of India](#) in 1950.

All the pillars of Ashoka were built at Buddhist monasteries, many important sites from the life of the [Buddha](#) and places of pilgrimage. Some of the columns carry inscriptions addressed to the monks and nuns. Some were erected to commemorate visits by Ashoka. Major pillars are present in the Indian [States](#) of [Bihar](#), [Uttar Pradesh](#), [Madhya Pradesh](#) and some parts of [Haryana](#).



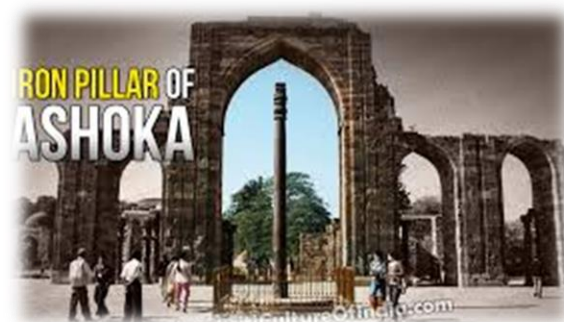
Ashoka Lion Pillar in Lauriya-Nandangarh  
2 Ashoka Pillar in Allahabad



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# List of Edicts of Ashoka

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_edicts\\_of\\_Ashoka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_edicts_of_Ashoka)

The following is an overview of [Edicts of Ashoka](#), and where they are located.

## Minor Rock Edict

- [Kandahar, Afghanistan](#)
- [Lampaka, Afghanistan](#)
- [Bahapur, Delhi](#)
- [Bairat, near Jaipur, Rajasthan](#)
- [Bhabru, second hill at Bairat, Rajasthan](#)
- [Gujarra, near Jhansi, Datia district, Madhya Pradesh](#)
- [Rupnath, on the Kaimur Hills near Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh](#)
- [Ratanpurwa, on the Kaimur Hills near Kharauli-Basaha Road, Bihar](#)
- [Panguraria, Sehore district, Madhya Pradesh](#)
- [Sohgaura, Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh](#)
- [Sahasram, Rohtas district, Bihar](#)
- [Barabar Caves, Bihar](#) (donatory inscriptions to the [Ājīvika](#) sect)
- [Mahasthan, Bogra district, Bangladesh](#)
- [Rajula-Mandagiri, near Pattikonda, Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh](#)
- [Jonagiri, Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh](#)
- [Palkigundu and Gavimath, Koppal district, Karnataka](#)
- [Brahmagiri, Chitradurga district, Karnataka](#)
- [Jatinga-Rameshwara, near Brahmagiri, Karnataka](#)
- [Siddapur, near Brahmagiri, Karnataka](#)
- [Maski, Raichur district, Karnataka](#)
- [Nittur, Bellary district, Karnataka](#)
- [Udegolam, Bellary district, Karnataka](#)

## Minor Pillar Edicts

- [Lumbini \(Rummindei\), Rupandehi district, Nepal](#) (the upper part broke off when struck by lightning; the original horse capital mentioned by [Xuanzang](#) is missing)
- [Nigali-Sagar \(or Nigliva\), near Lumbini, Rupandehi district, Nepal](#) (originally near the Buddha Konakarnana stupa)
- [Sarnath, near Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh](#) (Pillar Inscription, Schism Edict)
- [Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh](#) (originally located at [Kausambi](#) and probably moved to Allahabad by [Jahangir](#); Pillar Edicts I-VI, Queen's Edict, Schism Edict)



- [Sanchi](#), near [Bhopal](#), [Madhya Pradesh](#) (Schism Edict)

### **Major Rock Edicts (set of 14)**

- [Kandahar Greek Inscription](#) (portions of Rock Edicts 12 and 13 in Greek) and [Kandahar Bilingual Rock Inscription](#) (bilingual [Greek-Aramaic](#)), in [Kandahar](#), [Afghanistan](#).
- [Shahbazgarhi](#), [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa](#), [Pakistan](#) (in [Kharosthi script](#))
- [Mansehra Rock Edicts](#), [Mansehra](#), [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa](#) province, [Pakistan](#) (in [Kharosthi script](#))
- [Kalsi](#), near [Chakrata](#), [Dehradun district](#), [Uttarakhand](#)
- [Girnar](#), near [Junagadh](#), [Gujarat](#) ([Ashoka's Major Rock Edict](#))
- [Sopara](#), [Thane district](#), [Maharashtra](#) (fragments Rock Edicts 8 and 9)
- [Dhuli](#), near [Bhubaneswar](#), [Orissa](#) (includes [Kalinga Edict](#), excludes Rock Edicts 11-13)
- [Jaugada](#), [Ganjam district](#), [Orissa](#) (includes [Kalinga Edict](#), excludes Rock Edicts 11-13)
- [Sannati](#), [Kalaburagi district](#), [Karnataka](#) (separate Rock Edicts 1 and 2, fragments Rock Edicts 13 and 14)
- [Yerragudi](#), near [Gooty](#), [Kurnool district](#), [Andhra Pradesh](#) (Major Rock Edicts and Minor Rock Edict)

### **Major Pillar Edicts (set of 7)**

- [Kandahar](#), [Afghanistan](#) (fragments of Pillar Edicts VII)
- [Ranigat](#), [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa](#), [Pakistan](#)
- [Delhi-Meerut](#), [Delhi ridge](#), [Delhi](#) (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI; moved from [Meerut](#) to [Delhi](#) by [Feroz Shah](#))
- [Delhi-Topra](#), [Feroz Shah Kotla](#), [Delhi](#) (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII; moved from [Topra](#) to [Delhi](#) by [Feroz Shah](#))
- [Vaishali](#), [Bihar](#) (has no inscription)
- [Rampurva](#), [Champaran](#), [Bihar](#) (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI)
- [Lauriya-Nandangarh](#), [Champaran](#), [Bihar](#) (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI)
- [Lauriya-Araraj](#), [Champaran](#), [Bihar](#) (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI)

### **Complete standing Pillars, or Pillars with Ashokan Inscriptions**

- [Delhi-Topra pillar](#), in the fortress of [Feroz Shah Kotla](#), [Delhi](#) (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII); moved in AD 1356 from [Topra Kalan](#) in [Yamunanagar district](#) of [Haryana](#) to [Delhi](#) by [Firuz Shah Tughluq](#).
- [Delhi-Meerut](#), [Delhi ridge](#), [Delhi](#) (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI); moved from [Meerut](#) to [Delhi](#) by [Firuz Shah Tughluq](#) in 1356.

- [Nigali Sagar](#) (or Nigliva, Nigalihawa), near [Lumbini, Nepal](#). Pillar missing capital, one Ashoka edict. Erected in the 20th regnal year of Ashoka (c. 249 BC).
- [Rupandehi](#), near [Lumbini, Nepal](#). Also erected in the 20th regnal year of Ashoka (c. 249 BC), to commemorate Ashoka's pilgrimage to [Lumbini](#). Capital missing, but was apparently a horse.
- [Allahabad pillar](#), Uttar Pradesh (originally located at [Kausambi](#) and probably moved to Allahabad by [Jahangir](#); Pillar Edicts I-VI, Queen's Edict, Schism Edict).
- [Rampurva, Champaran, Bihar](#). Two columns: a lion with Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI; a bull without inscriptions. The [abacus](#) of the bull capital features [honeysuckle](#) and [palmette](#) designs derived from Greek designs.
- [Sanchi](#), near [Bhopal](#), Madhya Pradesh, four lions, Schism Edict.
- [Sarnath](#), near [Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh](#), four lions, Pillar Inscription, Schism Edict. This is the famous "[Lion Capital of Ashoka](#)" used in the national emblem of [India](#).
- [Lauriya-Nandangarh](#), Champaran, Bihar, single lion, Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI.
- [Lauriya Araraj](#), Champaran, Bihar (Pillar Edicts I, II, III, IV, V, VI).
- [Vaishali, Bihar](#), single lion, with no inscription.

The [Amaravati](#) pillar fragment is rather problematic. It consists of only six lines in [Brahmi](#) which are hardly decipherable. Only the word *vijaya* (victory) can be made out, arguably a word also used by Ashoka. [Sircar](#), who provides a detailed study, considers it as probably belonging to an Ashokan pillar.



**Geographical spread of known pillar capitals.**

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